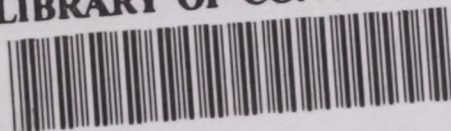


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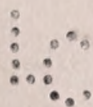
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ACHSAH

THE SISTER OF JAIRUS

By
MABEL CRONISE JONES



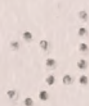
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ACHSAH

CHAPTER I.

The day was stifling, and Achsah had sought the lofty roof-garden, hoping to get a breath of cooler air. But even in the garden, sheltered by the mighty boughs of overhanging trees, she found no relief from the general oppressiveness. Capernaum was not often so parched, for, although the city stood somewhat back from the beach, the breezes of Galilee swept over it continually.

But now, for many weeks, no rain had fallen and Capernaum was suffering from a prolonged drought. The priests spent their days in the synagogue, offering incense and supplicating Jehovah. Jairus, as one of the rulers of the synagogue, was there much of the time.

Achsah's life was so circumscribed at best, that she missed him sorely from their mid-day meal. Even a Jewish maiden, brought up strictly according to the teachings of the Mosaic law, and kept under constant surveillance, was possessed of a woman's heart. So it chanced that Achsah sometimes chafed and fretted at her life. It happened now that she gave an impatient sigh, and then took a look over the roof as if hoping to descry something new. But it was all the same as ever. The garden around her, with its plants

Achsah

and flowers, looked parched and dried. On either side the garden were play-grounds for Salome, but the child had been too ill of late to take much pleasure in her usual sports and games.

The roof opposite the garden—for the house of Jairus was built to enclose a square court—was the drying place used by the servants. There was nothing pleasing to Achsah in the scene, and she drew her brows together in a sharp frown. The entire roof on both the outer and inner edge was fenced in by a battlement, as ordered by the Mosaic Law.

Achsah went listlessly to the side which overhung the street and looked below. She was guilty of a social transgression in so doing, but just at that moment she felt capable of defying every authority and custom.

She watched the people for a while; only a few Jewish tradesmen sauntered by and occasionally a Roman soldier on his way to the castellated fort, which Achsah could discern in the distance. Suddenly, she drew back with a hot, indignant flush on her cheeks. A young Roman officer, gazing curiously around, had caught a glimpse of the beautiful Jewish girl looking down upon him from her lofty vantage ground.

Immediately he made her a low salute, but though the action seemed both involuntary and reverent, Achsah was none the less angry.

"He knew that I should not have been there," she said to herself wrathfully; "he should have acted as if he had not seen me. I hate the Romans. They may conquer the Jewish nation, but they can never conquer the Jews themselves."

She walked to the outer staircase which led from the roof-garden to the court below.

As she neared the ground her name was called, and

Achsah

glancing down she saw Salome, her brother's only child, sitting by the fountain.

"Art thou here, Salome? I thought thou wert asleep."

"I could not sleep, Aunt Achsah; and I have been longing for thee. I thought thou wert in the garden, but I did not feel strong enough to climb up there."

"And what art thou doing here, my star?" Achsah asked, sitting down on the little bench beside her niece, and caressing the dark, curly head.

"I was trying to imagine that the sound of the water dripping down from the fountain was the patter of rain."

"And didst thou succeed?" Achsah asked tenderly.

"No, indeed, I did not. For although I shut my eyes tightly, I knew that the sun was pouring down and that the grass was all dried up."

"Shall we stay out here, my precious one?"

"I am so tired of it, I would rather not. There is nothing to be seen but the walls of our home on this side of the fountain."

Achsah looked at the pale, pinched face wistfully, the tears coming into her eyes as she saw how worn Salome seemed.

"Art thou feeling worse to-day, dear one?" she questioned softly.

"No, Aunt Achsah, only so very tired; I wish I might go off somewhere."

"Salome, couldst thou walk as far as the Great Grove? If thou canst, I will get thy mother's leave and we will go. Thou canst lie under the trees there, and perchance so near the sea, we will find some little breeze. I will take some fruit for thee to eat, and I will tell thee tales of all the Jewish wars and conquests, as mother used to tell me. Shall we go?"

Achsah

"Yea, let us go," the child cried eagerly; "if only mother will permit."

Achsah smiled and kissed the little worn face. "Go to thy room, and I will speak to thy mother." So, hand in hand, the maiden and the child went in. Salome slowly climbed the broad staircase to her room on the second floor, while Achsah searched the day-rooms below, knowing that somewhere there she should find Binea.

At last she found her, a gentle, patient little Jewess, whose time and thoughts were given almost wholly to the ordering of her household.

"Binea, I wish to take Salome to the Grove; the child needs a little change. Thou dost not care?"

"Of course I care," the wife of Jairus said quickly; "Jairus does not like thee to go about unattended; when thou dost do it, I can see that he is ill-pleased, though thou art so dear to him he cannot chide. Thou hast gone out thrice of late thus, and it must not be, as if thou wert a poor fisherman's wife and not the sister of Jairus."

"I go veiled, Binea, and when I have been forth, it has been on some errand of mercy that could not wait. We are not as we were, thou must remember. Each year the Roman exactions leave us poorer than we were the year before. I cannot always wait until some servant now is free to go with me. To-day, Salome needs some change. If ye wish, send Adoniram down to the Grove when he is through with his work."

"But then thou must go alone," Binea said hesitatingly.

"And if we must, what then? Methinks we'll grow accustomed to far worse things than that, my sister. See! We Jews of Capernaum are so poor that we could not even build our own synagogue, and

Achsah

our brothers in Jerusalem were forced to send us aid or leave us without a place of worship. Jairus is as well to do as any Hebrew in Capernaum, but thou dost know well, Binea, that we are really poor nowadays. It doth not behoove us to keep the customs of former times. Trouble not thyself, we'll go by the side street and wear our veils; the Grove will be deserted at this hour and Salome can have a little change."

"Well, if thou must go——" said Binea, still uncertainly.

Achsah laughed and kissed her. "Thou art too troubled over little things. Now that our nation has fallen under the Romans' power, what matters any lesser thing?"

She gave her brother's wife no time for further answer, but hastily sought out Salome, whom she soon attired for their walk. Then the two went out by a side door, and the Grove, with its thick trees, was quickly reached. This was a sort of public garden, and although kept by the Romans, was free of access to all. The Jews often went there, for the place was beautiful—before them stretched the sea of Galilee; to the south they could see the fertile plain of Gennesaret; back of them was the Junction Fount, which they could dimly descry, marking the meeting place of the four great roads which led to Arabia, Egypt, Tyre, and Damascus.

Usually this place was thronged with merchants from all lands, who met there to traffic and to barter their goods. The heat, however, had driven all away, and the Fount, usually such a busy spot, was now silent and deserted.

Salome threw herself upon the grass, and rested her head on Achsah's lap.

"See!" the child exclaimed "it is the month of Ab,

Achsah

and those trees should be laden with ripe figs; instead, they are all parched and dried."

"The Romans will have then so much the less," said Achsah bitterly. "They do wither up us Jews, even as the sun hath withered that tree."

"Thou dost hate the Romans, Aunt Achsah," Salome said, fondling her hand. "How came they to do us so much harm?"

"The God of Abraham was angry with us, dearest star, and visited the sins of all our fathers upon us. Our God hath not yet forgiven us for going after foreign gods. So does he give the Romans power and might to humble us. Each year they give us greater burdens to bear, and save some King shall come to set us free, I know not what the end will be."

"It all is strange," said Salome thoughtfully. "Why should the Romans injure us? We all are people just like them; but never mind. It makes thee look sad to talk of them. Art thou not glad we came? There is a cool breeze here, Aunt Achsah, and we seem to have the garden to ourselves."

"There is a cool breeze," Achsah assented wonderingly; "'tis strange we could not feel it in thy father's house." Then Achsah aroused her thoughts which seemed inclined that day to wander far, and told her little niece tales from her own brain, until at last the child, fanned by the cooler breeze, fell sound asleep, her first refreshing sleep for many days.

Achsah sat still, not daring to move, looking out upon the sea of Galilee, and lost in her own meditations until a low exclamation of surprise caused her to glance up.

There, looking down upon her in amazement, she saw the Roman officer, who had saluted her that very morning.

Achsah

Salome's head still rested in her lap, so that she could not move to rise without disturbing the child. With an angry frown she pulled her veil about her face, but ere she could determine what to say, the officer spoke.

"I crave your pardon, maid, but in unusual times one must do unusual things. See! a storm is coming and will be upon us soon. You were too engrossed to note it."

Achsah, with a little murmur of surprise, looked out across the sea and saw that a furious storm had surely gathered above Galilee's blue waters. A few drops of rain fell even as she looked.

The officer, with a hasty exclamation, stooped and lifted Salome into his arms, but so gently that the child never woke.

"You cannot reach your home before the storm bursts," he said decisively; "that is, if you dwell in the house of Jairus, where I saw you this morning. Do you abide there?" he questioned with sharp directness.

"Yes," she replied coldly.

"I'll take you to a fisherman's hut, then, just outside the Garden. Come, 'tis probably deserted, but 'twill shelter you."

Achsah, feeling an impotent anger at her own helplessness, hurried after him. For herself she cared nothing for the storm, but in Salome's weak condition, a sudden drenching might produce serious results.

CHAPTER II.

Just as the storm burst upon the earth, they reached the hut, and the Roman laid down his burden upon a little heap of sweet grasses piled in one corner. Then he turned to the older maiden.

"I am truly sorry that there is no couch for thee to sit upon," he said, courteously. "I would make thee more comfortable if I could."

She flushed beneath her veil. "For your goodness to the daughter of Jairus, I must accord you thanks," she said distantly; "but I pray you say not 'thou' or 'thee' to me; 'tis only in our families we use those words."

"Then do I crave your pardon yet again," the officer said smilingly; "but my ignorance of all your customs should not be put down as my fault. You Jews do give us no opportunity to know aught of your ways. You treat us like the dust beneath your feet. Oh yes——" as Achsah made a faint exclamation; "you give us outward respect and reverence because we are Romans, and now are rulers of the world; yet 'tis plain to see that in your hearts you hate us; you accord us honor with contempt; you sneer as we pass by; you make it plain that we are loathed by every one of you."

"What then?" she questioned coldly. "You have our gold; you control our tradesmen and our merchandise; our commerce is in your hands; we are weighted down with the heavy taxes imposed by your

Achsah

unscrupulous officials. 'Tis true the emperor doth give us the right to worship in our synagogues, and in the temple at Jerusalem. He doth not interfere with our religion. Why? Because, forsooth, he knows what our God has accomplished in the times gone past, for us. He fears Jehovah. What do you care for more than you have now? Do you expect the Jew to kiss the hand that humbles him? We are not dogs!"

"No, and you take good care to push your defiance to the utmost limit that you dare. The emperor has borne much from you Jews, because you are a peculiar people. Then, you helped Cæsar in the Alexandrine wars, and he rewarded you with many privileges that Antony and Dolabella confirmed in their consulate. These rights have the Jews received most strangely. They show our emperor scant courtesy; they push the bounds of his forbearance to the utmost. I tell you, Rome will not long endure such arrogance."

"What will you do?" Achsah questioned scornfully.

"The emperor will burn your holy city to the ground; he will scatter all you Hebrews through the world; he will leave not one stone on another in all Jerusalem."

Achsah laughed contemptuously. "You talk to me like this, then wonder in the same breath that we do not welcome the Romans to our homes."

He flushed hotly. "I crave your pardon, maiden, still once more. I meant not to speak such things, but your very silence breathes forth such contempt and scorn for me and Rome, that I were less than man—or more—to hear it meekly. Will you not pardon me?"

"'Tis of small moment; what the Romans put upon us we must bear. We are helpless. Even I, perforce, accustomed to all the observances of the Jewish house-

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hold—am standing here alone with you, a stranger and a Roman. The fault is mine, I came forth unattended.”

A strange look came at those words into the Roman’s eyes. “If it be so great a sin to speak by chance unto a man whom you know not, then will I go forth this instant to the fort whither I was bound when I saw you. Shall I go?”

“No,” she said hastily. “The storm is most terrible, and you would have been safely sheltered but for us.”

“Then if I stay, forget just for a moment that I am a Roman. My name is Junius, and I am an officer of the emperor, and a distant relative as well. I have something to say to you concerning Jairus.”

“What can you know of him?” she questioned haughtily.

“Who can be in Capernaum and not know Jairus?” he returned. “What I learned, I learned by chance—no matter how. I have some friends among the Hebrews that would be more politic than you. They are not Jews, you say, then. Oh! they hate me at the heart full as much as you, I make no doubt; but they seek to hide it. If they ever have a chance to slay me, that they will do, for all their smooth, fair words. Now they have told me much gossip of the town, and of the synagogue as well—so was it I did learn something that concerns you. Shall I tell it?”

“As you will,” she said indifferently.

He bit his lip angrily. “If that be your mind, there is no need for me to go on; you cannot even speak to me fairly, when I seek to do you service. This same day when I saw you on the roof garden and saluted you, I did it with as much reverence as I would had you been a goddess from the sky. But

Achsah

you!—you seemed to think my very look was pollution. You—are you the wife of Jairus?”

“His sister,” she corrected curtly, then slowly added, “If there be aught concerning him which I should know, then tell me.”

“You know not how to plead, I see,” he said with a smile; “you ask your favors with an air of large command. Yet, I believe that ere a year has passed, you will be a suppliant to me.”

“Never!” she cried hotly, throwing back her veil in a moment of forgetfulness, and looking full at him with blazing eyes. “I—a suppliant to you! You are beside yourself.”

“Perhaps,” he answered quietly, gazing full upon her glowing face, “yet do I think that I am right; and know this now—whatever favor you do ask of me, that shall be granted, I swear it by the temple of Jupiter Ammon.”

“You should not swear at all,” she quickly interposed. “It is very wrong. Why should I ask aught of you? You are distraught.”

“With the madness of Venus, then,” the Roman muttered low, but although Achsah heard, she did not comprehend, and he, with momentary wisdom, did not explain his ejaculation. “Last night, when the name of Jairus was mentioned in the gossip, I gave it no heed; what, in good sooth, was Jairus or any Jew to me? But when I saw you, I fain would have told you all, for you love Jairus, and I would keep grief from your eyes, if so I could.”

“Such talk is not for the ears of Jewish women,” she answered. “’Tis thus I presume you talk to every woman at your capital; but I tell you, we are made in other mold. Now, if you have truly anything to say, declare it.”

“I’ll tell you of your brother—but of myself just

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one word first. Never to any maiden in Rome or any land, have I spoken as I did just speak to you. If I can win you for my wife—Hush!—that will I do. But if you come not to me willingly with all your scorn and cold contempt put underneath your foot—then would I not take you to wife for all the dowry that a Cræsus might bestow. That is all. I love you. I loved you when my eyes first fell on you to-day, and Venus herself must smile upon my suit.”

“Now if you do not hush,” she broke in angrily, “I’ll awaken Salome and go forth in the storm; stay here and listen to your talk, I will not. You are drunk with wine.”

“That is not true, fair maid, but let it pass. Venus will fight for me, and you will not forget my words. Remember they were from my heart of hearts. Of Jairus, this is what I learned. And you will do well to take earnest heed to what I say, if you really love him.”

CHAPTER III.

“Know first, sister of Jairus, that out of contempt for the man who servilely seeks my favor thus, even while he sneers at me in his heart, I did fill him full the last time that he came—with Roman wine. So, as he never had tasted it before it did loose his tongue and he told me things that now he does not remember that he said; for he was drunk. Thus was it, that instead of telling to me the merest gossip, as his custom is, he told me graver things; some of them do relate to rebellion against the emperor—these can I crush myself. But he also made it plain that Jairus is much feared and envied by many of the Jews. You know well that the Hebrews of Capernaum are poor; Jairus alone does seem to prosper somewhat. For this they hate him; they hate him, too, because he is a ruler in the synagogue. So some who have a fancied grievance against him plan to waylay him when next he journeys to Jerusalem.”

Achsah's veil once more was cast aside, and her great eyes searched deep the face of Junius as if she would peer down to his very soul, and see if truth were written there.

“How can I tell if all your tale be true?” she cried at last. “If it be true, then tell the politarchs; that is your duty. Why should a Jew conspire against Jairus? Is he not the greatest of them all? The noblest and the best?”

“That all may be, even as you say, fair maid. But

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in his goodness and his prosperity lie the root of this jealousy. Men do not envy their equals or inferiors; 'tis their superiors alone that stir them up to rancorous hatred."

"Tell me," the maiden cried imperiously, "who told you all this tale?"

"I told you that it was no matter how the plot came unto my ears, and I cannot tell you the name of this man. The emperor is very strict in his commands that we be not mixed up in your religious broils. I have told you more than I did mean to tell, that you might know how I gained such knowledge—I, a Roman! I have told you more than prudence dictates, that you might be assured of my truth, and also," he said in a low tone, "that you might know how I do trust you. The man's name must I not tell for many reasons; it might defeat some plans of mine did I do so."

"Then we are helpless, and I know not what to think. If I tell Jairus this story, with no proofs or names, he will either laugh it all to scorn or else regard, perhaps, his truest friend as a secret foe. Your tale is but a phantom of the brain."

"You shall yet beg my forgiveness for those most unjust words," he flashed back hotly. "I seek to serve you in your own despite, but I must still maintain my honor inviolate and respect my emperor's commands. Tell this to Jairus, but mention no word of all our talk to any other. Jairus will know what tradesmen feel aggrieved with him; what ones do seek his company to Jerusalem; they plan, I take it, to murder him upon the road to Jerusalem, and then give out that they did fall among thieves, and that so it was your brother lost his life. What noble Jews dwell in your midst!" he added mockingly: "I presume they go to your synagogue, and make long

Achsah

prayers upon the street corners. I know this man doth. I have heard him!"

"Nay," the girl cried angrily, "we are not hypocrites; no Jew would stain his hands with a brother's blood. That is murder. Jehovah doth forbid it. For that crime was not Cain cursed by all mankind and forced to live a wanderer upon the face of the earth?"

"And would you trust every Jew you know in Capernaum, with your honor and your brother's life?"

"I am a maid," she coldly said. "Until we put on the married raiment, we know not many men outside of our own households; so, in Capernaum there be many Jews I do not know; yet they are Jews, and subject to the law of Moses. They strive to live according to the doctrines of the law; so are they worthy of my confidence. Of those whom I have talked with there is not one who would be guilty of such a deed as you have named. I would trust them utterly, every one——" then a sudden flash of recollection sweeping over her, she added truthfully, "There is one alone, whom I dislike, but the fault doth doubtless lie with me. He is Lamech, the son of Zerubbabel."

A subtle change on the face of Junius caught the quick eye of Achsah.

"Now did you speak of him—of Lamech?"

"What matter of whom I spoke?" the Roman questioned coldly; "you do not believe me. Had any man so set my word at naught, he would not now be living; because you are a woman, a Jewess, and the maiden whom I love, you know full well that you can heap insults on my head, and that I am powerless to defend myself. I seek but to serve you; yet you spurn me like a dog."

Achsah looked at him, hearing, but until later, not comprehending his words.

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"So it was Lamech. I must believe your tale. Jairus will know well how to defend himself when I have told him all. Lamech! strange things have oftentimes been said of him, but there has never been aught proved against him that I know. I crave your pardon for my doubts, good Roman," she added with an effort: "why you should thus seek to serve me, I know not, but I do thank you. My words to-day are weak, but Jairus shall voice our gratitude himself."

"I want no thanks, save yours," the Roman returned firmly. "Why I seek to serve you—I have said. I thought at first you were the wife of Jairus and then——"

"Nay," she interrupted quickly, "'tis plain that you know not much of all our ways. My garments are those of a maid—not of a wife or of a widow. Now the storm hath ceased for a space; will you not go on to the fort? A servant will come and find us here, and I would rather you were gone."

"Then I will go, although I fain would stay; but from a distance I shall keep a watch on you. If your servant comes not soon, then will I send some trusty fisherman to carry the young child unto your home. See me again you shall, though how or when, I know not. The Jewess maid shall be the Roman's wife!"

"You do presume too far," she said sternly, "because you have done me some service this day, is no reason why you should use such words. Go!"

With one last look that strove to penetrate her veil, he bowed and left.

When he had surely gone, the maiden placed herself within the doorway and looked eagerly around. Ere long she descried the figure of Adoniram coming toward her, and she called his name eagerly.

"Oh, thou art safe and dry," Adoniram cried joy-

Achsah

fully. "We did fear for thee, and the wife of Jairus is half distraught. Where is the child?"

"In here, Adoniram, asleep and safe; not a drop of rain hath fallen on her. Canst thou carry her in thy arms? Her sandals do but poorly shield her feet, and I would not break her slumber unless we must."

"Yea, mistress, I can carry her with ease; though she is eleven years, she is in weight no more than many a child of six. This sleep will do her good."

Then the servitor, with greatest care, lifted Salome, and with Achsah by his side, hastened back to the abode of Jairus.

Binea, watching anxiously, turned pale with fear when she saw them approach, for she thought that some terrible accident must have befallen the child of her love. Before she could speak, however, Achsah held up a warning finger.

"Hush, Binea! Salome is well and sleeping; we were safe within a fisherman's hut before the storm broke. Adoniram will carry Salome to her room."

"Now the God of Abraham be praised!" ejaculated Binea softly; and speeding rapidly up the stairs she entered her child's room, and from a corner brought forth the mattress or "bed" which, during the day, was always rolled up. With Achsah's help she deftly placed it in a cool corner of the room, and Adoniram kneeling down slid Salome upon it. The child moved restlessly, but did not waken, and all three of the older persons stole softly from the room.

"I am relieved to see thee," Binea cried, grasping Achsah's arm tightly. "I am never at ease if the child is out of my sight, though I do know well how thou dost love her. She took no hurt to-day, you think? I have been chiding myself severely for allowing her to go."

"Dear Binea," Achsah said tenderly, "thou art

Achsa

weighed down with care. It must be the mother-heart in thee that will not suffer thee to rest. A mother is fearful always. If her child is somewhat ill, she imagines that the sickness is unto death; if the child be well she imagines all calamities to come. Motherhood is a most awful thing. You go to find your babe within the grasp of death, and all your life that dreadful shadow clings around you. For to-day you can be at ease; you have great cause to praise the God of Abraham that Salome and I went forth. The child is all the better for the walk, and—where is Jairus?"

"He is in the day-room; the priest hath given him some scrolls to read, 'The Song of the Three Children,' and 'The Prayer of Manasses,' they are called. Some of the priests do hold, so Jairus said, that they were inspired by Jehovah himself. I would not go to Jairus now; thou wilt interrupt his researches."

"Then must his work wait till another time," the maiden returned impatiently, and ere Binea could protest further she hurriedly left the room.

CHAPTER IV.

Jairus was seated on a couch, bending intently over a scroll. One could tell at a glance that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews; his long, loose robe fell in rich folds on the floor, confined by the leathern girdle about the waist, and a loose velvet jacket, heavily embroidered. On the couch beside him lay his kaffieh and the coat of fine lamb's wool ordered by the Law to be worn by every male Israelite to remind him of his duties. At each corner were fringes, symbolizing the enactments of the Law, and a hem of blue, representing the holiness of God's people. It was the coat of Jairus by day; his covering at night, and some time it would be his shroud. Achsah looked at it thoughtfully. It meant so much to her, but to others—to the Roman Junius for instance—it would be no symbol, merely a subject for mockery. The thought of Junius roused her to the task before her.

"Jairus!"

The ruler started from his thoughts and looked up with a pleasant smile.

"Thou art welcome, Achsah! Is all well with thee? Thou art looking very serious."

"All is very well with me, Jairus, but I would see thee for a few moments. Did Binea tell thee that Salome and I went but now to the Grove?"

"She said naught of it," Jairus returned gravely.

"I guessed as much; yet it is well I went; now

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listen, brother!" and thereupon the maiden told him all, save the words of love which Junius had spoken.

The face of Jairus changed as she proceeded, and he listened intently. When she had paused he said no word for a few moments, then he looked at her tenderly.

"I like not for thee to go forth without a servant, Achsah. I have tried since our parents died long since to be both father and mother unto thee, since I was all thou didst have left. I grieve that now I cannot do for thee as I would. It is not right to keep thee so confined. Thou shouldst have a servant to wait upon thee constantly."

"'Tis well, perhaps, I had not this day," the girl cried hastily. "What matters aught of me? Thou doest for me to the limit of thy power—what more can any one? Let it pass. Tell me of this tale; dost thou believe it?"

"It bears the imprint of truth," the ruler said slowly. "I know this Junius somewhat; he hath been but lately sent from Rome, and knows not yet much of all our customs. I have met him in my capacity as judge, and he seems to me both honorable and fair."

"Yet he is a Roman," the girl said bitterly.

"My child," Jairus said sadly, "the Romans are not our worst enemies; though I do hate Rome as well as thou, yet must we remember that if the Jews had not sinned against the God of Israel and done evil in His sight, Rome could never have vanquished us."

"That may be true, yet it makes the Roman yoke no easier to bear. And so you trust this tale! Why should Lamech hate thee so?"

"For many things, my sister. His is a low and petty nature. I have detected him in underhanded

Achsah

tricks with foreign tradesmen, and have forced him to make restitution; he does envy me my home, my place in the synagogue, and——” Jairus paused and looked at Achsah, but the words in his heart remained unspoken then. “There are many reasons, you see, why he bears me no good will; more even than I have told thee. One thing there is which I can declare to you. It concerns the Nazarene. He hath been often in Capernaum, though thou hast not seen him, Achsah. Next time he comes I would that he would enter into my house.”

“Jairus,” the girl cried sharply, “thou dost not credit these wild claims which some are making now for him.”

“I know not, Achsah,” Jairus said gravely; “he makes no claims as yet for himself, but recall the stories of his birth; of his visit to the temple as a boy; ’tis but a year since he first came here. He did no wonders on that first visit, but remember all that thou hast since heard. He came here and taught and called to him, Andrew and Peter and James and John. Then he cast out a devil; he healed Peter’s mother-in-law; he passed among crowds of the sick and diseased and healed them all. I saw it done. Men that I have known from boyhood up to have been afflicted with some terrible malady, were healed by his mere word or touch.”

“And thou didst see it, Jairus?” she asked wonderingly. “Thou hast said but little on the subject.”

“Because my mind is not yet clear as to who he is. I fear to say too much or too little. He has been here since he did those wonders of which I just spoke. He came and healed a palsied man; he called Matthew. I heard him talk as never I heard man talk before. He hath been here still again; he healed a withered hand; he ordained his apostles; he healed

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the centurion's servant, and he has preached here many marvelous things. Who is he?"

"Is he not a prophet, Jairus? That is what I hear many declare."

"He is a prophet—or greater! Whatever or whoever he be, Lamech hates him. It may be perchance because the evil always hates the good. But this Nazarene hath come to be a cause of dissension in the synagogue. The priests do hate and fear him; nor can I wonder, for he doth scourge them with his words as with a lash."

"Yet thou dost deem him worthy of honor, still?" Achsa cried aghast.

"Child, the priests are men, and as a ruler in the synagogue I see strange practices. The priests have fallen into corrupt ways and merit the rebukes they get. Yet, let this pass. I meant not to speak of this until in my own mind 'twas clear whether the Nazarene be a prophet merely or——" he paused as if afraid to go further.

"Or?" she queried breathlessly.

"Or God, himself, my sister!" he ended reverently: "this is my thought. Can any man perform these marvels save God be in him? Because I do not curse the Nazarene, the priests begin to look askance at me, for they do claim that his power comes from the Evil One. I see the plot in full. The priests wish not their power abridged, so they fear the Nazarene and all who hold with him. Lamech, doubtless, sees their thoughts and turns their desires to his own purposes. He is a craven Jew. He fears and hates me, for I will not permit his thieving tricks while I am ruler in the synagogue and so, a judge also in Capernaum. I owe my thanks to Junius, the Roman; he must be freed from all connection with my knowledge of this plot, but I will see him this night and betwixt

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us we may contrive some plan that shall entrap the plotters, and not connect his name therewith. Thou owest him thanks for thy brother's life, Achsah," he ended seriously.

The maiden flushed, but no reply rose to her lips. It was no easy thing to feel so great a weight of obligation to a hated Roman.

Binea entering then, summoned them to the evening meal. In the house of Jairus, the large table was always set, that any guests or wayfarers might have instant hospitality. The table in three portions formed three sides of a square; on the outer edge were placed the cushioned divans, and the Hebrews, while scorning everything Roman, had yet adopted their custom of half-reclining on these divans, and resting themselves upon the left arm. To-night no guest was present and Jairus being unwontedly silent, neither Binea nor Achsah ventured many words. Inside the tables the servants moved noiselessly about, but the food they brought was barely tasted.

Upstairs Salome still slept. Achsah felt relieved when Jairus at length ordered the food removed and rose to leave the room.

"Thou art not going from the house?" Binea questioned half reproachfully as Jairus picked up his silk kaffieh and adjusted it upon his head.

"I must," he answered briefly, stooping to fasten his sandals more securely, and Binea, according to her wont, said nothing further.

As Jairus reached the threshold of his house he looked back a moment. "You women had best remain upstairs; I may bring here a Roman that it is necessary I should see upon important matters."

With that he left, and his wife and sister meekly obeyed his words and sought the upper apartments.

Achsah heard her brother return a short hour

Achsah

later, and caught the sound of another voice, which she knew to be that of Junius. The murmuring sound reached them for a long time, and Achsah heard impatiently her sister-in-law's exclamations of wonder over the presence of a Roman within the house of Jairus.

Later on, Salome woke, and Achsah passing down the stairs to get some fruit for the child, almost encountered the Roman leaving. She drew back hastily within the curtains of a doorway near at hand, but not until the eyes of Junius had met hers in a quick flash that seemed to her heated brain to speak of certain triumph over her and hers.

Jairus, too, had seen her, and when he had followed his guest to the door, and cried again, "Peace be to you," he called his sister.

"I did not think that I should meet him," she murmured contritely. "Forgive me, Jairus; of late I seem to do all things wrongly."

"'Tis of no moment," Jairus returned half absently, and then Achsah perceived the gravity of his expression.

"Canst thou not hit upon any plan to circumvent this Lamech, and entangle him in his own net?" she asked anxiously.

"That was easily done. Would that were all! O Achsah! Achsah! the Roman has told me bitter things! I fear the God of Abraham will punish us still further."

CHAPTER V.

"Thou dost frighten me, Jairus," she cried, clutching his arm in terror, "what dost thou mean?"

"I mean that the priests are laying deep plans against the Nazarene." Jairus answered with a heavy groan; "the priests and the rulers of Jerusalem are in the plot as well. They hate the Man. They have tried again and again to entrap him in some argument, but always he turns the trap to capture them. So now they plan to seize him. Why can they not wait in peace?" the Jew cried, pacing restlessly back and forth; "if he be but a vile impostor and no prophet even—as they all declare—then must time surely prove it; if he be more—as I do almost think—time will prove that, too."

"And did you learn of this from the Roman also?"

"Yea; the Roman wine did make Lamech free with his tongue and he told all he knew or planned. 'Twas a good scheme to try for once, but Junius will not dare to try it often. Oh, the Nazarene! the Nazarene! why do they force me thus with all their plots and underhanded plans, to declare myself before I even know mine own heart?"

"If he be truly prophet," Achsah returned quickly, "all their plottings against him will not avail. But thou art no prophet—only an upright man, whom a cowardly knave may slay—and thus break Binea's heart and mine."

Jairus smiled. "Be at peace, my sister; all is well arranged. I shall go forth to Jerusalem on the third

Achsah

day from now, as 'twas first proposed, on business for the synagogue. But I shall be on my guard, for I am warned. Moreover, I shall go armed. Nor is that all. The Roman goeth, too, with certain officers, not in company with me—but some time previously. If possible he will learn from Lamech to-night, by means of more Roman wine, where the attack will be made. Then, with his men he will wait there concealed, and when they rush on me he will hurry to my aid as if by accident. It is his plan and it seems good, for he will see the miscreants, and as it will be a civil and not a religious misdemeanor, he can act with all authority."

"Oh, Jairus, do not go," she broke forth suddenly, with a rush of tears; "thou art trusting thy life in his hands—and he a stranger and a Roman! Stay here! Go not to Jerusalem."

"Listen, my sister," he said gravely. "I must go, for I have passed my word. Besides, if I remained at home the danger would still menace me. I should live in constant dread. I must meet and crush this plot; thus only can I be secure. What if the Roman fail me, though I stake my life that he will not. Am I not a Jew, able to defend myself?"

But Achsah only wept anew.

"Say no word of all this to Binea," Jairus commenced abruptly. "I will not have her anxious for me now when her heart is so full of care for Salome. If all ends happily, I will tell her; till then, say nothing. Dost thou understand?"

"Yea, brother."

"Then dry your eyes, or she will surely suspect that something goes amiss. The Roman urged me to tell thee—— but I will let that wait also," and Jairus turned away, so that Achsah could do naught but gaze after him in amaze.

Achsah

For the next two days the Roman was much at the house of Jairus. Though neither of the women saw him, they heard his voice, and even Binea grew to know it well, while she marveled much at his constant presence. As for Achsah, she lived in a dream of terror that left her not even when she slept. A thousand times she saw the image of her brother, ghastly in death. Her pleadings he ignored, with scarce a word of reply, and now on the morrow he would set forth. That night the Roman would secretly set out, and Achsah put aside all maidenly reserve and all conventionalities, determined to speak once to him ere he left, and try to assure herself of his probity.

It was barely dusk when Achsah heard him, from her station in an inner room, exchange parting salutations with Jairus. Wrapping her veil quickly about her, she sped into the court, then out through the wicket gate, underneath the house. Thus she knew that she could intercept the Roman on his way to the fort.

As she opened the gate and stood listening breathlessly, she caught the sharp ring of his footfalls, and a moment later he had halted at her side with an exclamation of surprise.

"Is it you, Achsah?" he queried. "You see, I have learned your name from Jairus; by so much am I richer than I was. What do you seek here alone at this hour?"

"I was watching for you," she said in a low tone and noting, even through her veil, the triumphant gleam that shot out from the Roman's eyes; "what care I for customs or usages when the life of Jairus is in jeopardy? Come over by the fountain," she added imperiously.

Silently Junius followed her, a slight smile curving

A c h s a h

his lips. When the fountain was reached at length the maiden turned herself about, and throwing back her veil, peered as intently into the Roman's face as the gathering darkness would permit.

"I want to assure myself, if so be I can," she said harshly, "that you are a man of some honor, though a Roman! My brother goes forth to-morrow to Jerusalem. He relies upon your aid; are you leading him on to death?"

"By Jupiter, no!" the Roman cried hotly. "Is not my honor at issue? If harm should befall him could I ever look at you again? You say the life of Jairus may be at stake. Well, so be it; yet what is dearer even than life to me, shall be bond for his safe return. I pledge you my word, no harm shall happen to him. Am I not going forth now, not on business for the emperor as I do make pretense, but merely to succor Jairus?"

"I must believe you," she said with a sigh, "for all your thought, I thank you. For any seeming coldness, pardon me. I can think of naught but this horrible plot. If you all return safe I can better voice my thanks. Peace go with you, and so we part."

"One moment," the officer cried eagerly. "I told you that I loved you, from the moment when I first beheld you on that roof; you mocked my words. Do not think that I am like some of my countrymen. I was brought up by my father strictly, and of the licentiousness of the Roman capital, of which you may have heard, I know nothing. I swear it. I bring to you a life as pure as yours. No—hear me—perchance the gods intend that I, not Jairus, shall fall to-morrow. This once let me speak."

"To what good?" the maiden coldly said. "I love you not; I hate your country; yet, bear this in mind, for it is true: If I did love you with all my heart and

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strength, yet could we never wed. I am a Jewess—you a Roman. You believe in heathen gods; I worship the God of Abraham. We are as far asunder as the east and west. Say no more of this."

Junius turned pale beneath the words that dropped, clear-cut, from her proud lips. "I am not a child to be turned from my purpose," he answered resolutely. "You shall yet be mine—and gladly, too. But this can wait, now that you know my heart. I wish to speak to you of Lamech. He is a Jew; of your religion; he attends your synagogue. Would you wed with him?"

"How dare you so insult me?" she cried passionately. "You have made me repent a score of times already that I so far transgressed a maiden's customs as to seek you this night. I shall leave you here."

"Not yet," he cried, holding her arm in a firm grasp. "'Twas not I who insulted you. Lamech long since approached Jairus and wished to negotiate with him for your espousal. Nay," as Achsah gave utterance to an exclamation of contempt, "I speak the truth. Jairus knew Lamech at the time full well, and sent off Lamech's friends with curt refusal when they sought him often for your hand. Jairus told me this, and I did urge that you should know it, too, for your own self-defense. Jairus thought differently, but he had pledged his word to me that on our return from Jerusalem he would tell you all. But I thought it best to tell you now, since the opportunity has come. You are another cause to urge Lamech on to revenge—and—I fear—I know not what"; he murmured the last words low, but Achsah caught them.

"You fear—for whom? Do we not know all the plot?"

"All as regards Jairus. But against you, I fear

Achsah

they plan some evil that I have not penetrated as yet. Promise me that you will not leave the house of Jairus till we return."

She hesitated a brief moment, then she said: "Such pledge is needless; still, I pass my word, if it will please you. Perchance I owe you more than I do think. Now go, and the Lord prosper you." Then before the Roman could speak, Achsah sped swiftly to the house, and left him gazing after her in deepest thought.

CHAPTER VI.

The hours went by on leaden wings. Achsah felt a weight upon her spirits. Should she ever see her brother again? Each day as she awoke she wondered if news would come before night-fall. On the evening of the third day, she espied Adoniram, who had accompanied his master. Binea was in the upper room with Salome, and Achsah hurried to the court to greet their faithful servant.

"How art thou come, Adoniram?" she cried anxiously. "Is thy master well? What hath befallen thee?"

"My master is well," Adoniram replied with a low salute. "But he feared you might hear that he was attacked by ruffians on the road, and so while he went forward to Jerusalem, he sent me back with words of reassurance unto you. He is safe and all unharmed, and he has gone on to Jerusalem under the escort of a Roman officer who haply came to our assistance. They will return together."

So all the story had been true, and Junius, in truth, had saved her brother's life! Well—she would thank him some day, though he were a Roman.

"Where are the prisoners, Adoniram?" she asked; "or perchance the ruffians were not captured?"

"Yes, they were taken by the Romans, mistress; all—that is, save one—Lamech. He escaped into the woods after wounding Junius, the Roman officer, in the arm. The soldiers will soon be scouring all the country for him. He will find it no slight thing to

Achsah

wound an officer of the emperor. His escort escaped unscathed and are taking their prisoners on to Jerusalem for trial. Jairus will be detained there—it may be—for a week.”

“Am I to tell all this to thy mistress, Adoniram?”

“My master ordered not, unless she should hear some rumor of it elsewhere. Thou canst say that I returned to fulfill my duties here at home, as he fell in with a party of friends and so did not need my escort.”

“Very well,” said Achsah, and so it was arranged. The load was lifted from her heart, but still she longed most intensely for the return of Jairus. Her promise to the Roman kept her confined to the house more closely than usual, but although she pined under the imprisonment, she would not break her word.

Thus more than three weeks sped dully and monotonously along, and the time dragged heavily for all, even for Salome, who seemed with each succeeding day to grow more weak and languid. One evening, as Achsah and Binea sat in a lower room, the outer door opened suddenly, and as quickly closed again.

“There is my father,” cried Salome gladly; and it truly was, for the next moment Jairus had entered and clasped wife and child in his arms. Achsah’s quick eyes caught the outline of another figure halting irresolutely in the half-gloom beyond the rays of the earthenware lamp, that stood on a low pedestal near her.

The Roman, seeing that he was observed, came forward half reluctantly. “It was not by my wish that I have intruded on you to-night. Jairus would have it so, against my protests.”

Jairus caught the words, and loosed his hold on Binea to take his sister in his arms.

Achsah

"Yes, I did bring him against all of his excuses. I would have my wife, my sister, and my child see the man to whom they owe my safety and my life."

A horrified exclamation burst from Binea's lips. "It is so, indeed, wife," he said tenderly. "Prithee, order the servants to set forth some food; our guest will eat with me, and afterwards we will seek you here, and relate all that transpired while we were gone. I am safe and well, rest now content with that."

As Binea hurried meekly from the room in obedience to the word of Jairus, Salome threw her hands about her father's neck and drew him to the couch beside her. While Jairus was listening to the child's chatter, Achsah said in a low voice to the Roman: "This house doth owe you more than it can ever repay—we cannot thank you as we would——"

"I pray you cease," Junius interposed harshly. "I tried to stay away to-night because I wish no duty-gratitude—at least from you. But Jairus would take no refusal, and how could I resist the chance of seeing you?"

"You must not speak thus. You make me seem cold and ungrateful, to you to whom we freely acknowledge our deep debt. Yet, to such words I cannot listen. Tell me of Lamech; hath he been captured?"

"No. He is still at large, but taken he soon must be. I would rather have lost all our other six prisoners than him. I hear that he has been seen lurking in the neighborhood of Gennesaret. You have kept your pledge to me," he asked searchingly, "and have not gone forth?"

"I have kept it," with a faint smile. "Did I not promise? But your return absolves me; of that am I most glad, for both Salome and I have felt the

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need of fresher air. Tell me of your hurt," she added abruptly; "was it very painful?"

"And dost thou care if it were?" he asked softly.

"You know I do," she replied, making an effort to speak with her usual coldness.

Something in his look and tone drew the color to the maiden's cheeks, and she quickly wrapped her veil about her face, for till then it had been thrown back from the cap, according to the custom of the Jewish women when in their homes, and by themselves. When Jairus and the Roman entered so suddenly Achsah forgot, in the excitement of the moment, that Junius was gazing unrebuked upon her features.

He smiled at her movement, and murmured: "You cannot hide your features from me, love, for I know them all, and in my heart I see them continually."

Achsah turned away angrily. What sort of man was this, with whom neither her protests nor her scorn nor her coldness availed aught?

Jairus looked up as she approached his side, a troubled, worn expression on his face. "Salome seems not so well to me, as when I left, Achsah."

"She hath grieved for thee," Achsah returned with an effort to speak cheerfully. "She will be better now thou art returned."

"I would the Nazarene might see her. Junius and I heard most wondrous things of him in Jerusalem. The priests there hate him even as they do here, but only because he doth expose their wickedness. I saw men who told most marvelous deeds that they had witnessed."

"Yea," the Roman said thoughtfully, "it is all very strange to me. I must see this prophet soon. I cannot understand why your priests and teachers should

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so denounce and hate him. We saw one man, fair Jewess," he went on, addressing himself to Achsah, "who declared that he had had an infirmity for eight and thirty years, and that while he lay by the pool of Bethesda Jesus came, and bade him rise, take up his bed and walk. Immediately, then, he said, that he was made whole."

"Yes," Jairus added bitterly, "and many of the priests made excuse that as the wonder was done on a Sabbath day, it was an evil deed, and so they sought to slay him."

A silence fell upon them all, and no one spoke until presently Binea returned, and at her summons Jairus and the Roman passed on to their meal.

When the story was told later on, of all the dangers Jairus had undergone, Achsah sat silently on the couch by Salome's side and spoke no word; her veil was heavily folded across her face, but the Roman noted with surprise that she, as well as Binea, was arrayed in his honor in finest raiments. The maiden, in truth, wore a profuse quantity of gold and silver ornaments with charms, bracelets, anklets, chains, brooches, and a large medallion binding down the veil upon her forehead.

The Roman looked at her almost impatiently. Here in the home of her fathers she seemed further removed from him than ever before. For the first time he comprehended how deep the chasm was that separated her from him. "She will never worship my gods, nor can I worship her Jehovah," he said to himself at length. "My dream is but sheer madness. I will return to Rome and forget her, if Venus grants me the power."

Binea's gratitude to the Roman knew no bounds when at length she heard in full all that Junius had done. Her eager words, and those of Salome cov-

Achsa h

ered the silence of Achsah, for she had resolved to speak no further word to the Roman on any pretext, though at her brother's command she had put on her costliest garments.

When the Roman took his leave, Jairus held his hand in a close grasp. "You are a Roman, I a Hebrew; you worship heathen gods; I, the God of Abraham. Still thou art a true and honorable man, and I pray thee, wear this signet ring as a pledge 'twixt us of friendship. If I can ever recompense thee, I shall; but such debts are seldom paid."

* * * * *

For many days thereafter the wife of Jairus could talk of nothing but her husband's marvelous escape from death, and the treachery of Lamech. The wretch was still at large, though officers of the law were in close pursuit of him. Of Junius, the Roman, the household of Jairus saw no more, though the ruler met him almost daily. Matters soon resumed their wonted course, though it became well known throughout Capernaum, and even in Jerusalem, that Jairus stood high in favor with the Romans. The priests dared show no more hostility against him, and they even became almost servile in their homage.

If Achsah's thoughts turned often to the handsome, powerful Roman, it was only, she told herself, because she had so little else of which to think. As the days drifted by, however, she felt a darker shadow creeping over their home. The wise men learned in medicine came daily to the house of Jairus, but they were powerless to check the insidious disease which sapped all of Salome's strength. "She has no vigor," they said; "she has never been strong. There is no special disease for us to check; she needs life put into her, and only the God of Abraham may do that."

Achsah

Yet there were days when the child felt more like her former self, and then Achsah took heart again. Salome had been looking forward for some little time to the celebration of the twelfth anniversary of her birth. In the afternoon Jairus had promised her a feast of all manner of eastern fruits and dainties, and the young girls of her age were coming to join in the festivities.

Salome was full of happy excitement, and Binea looking at her sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, felt a sudden load lifted from her heart. "I am over-anxious, as Achsah declares," she told herself. "The child is not so very ill."

Ere the morning had advanced far Salome sought her aunt.

"Aunt Achsah, take me to the Grove," she begged. "We have not been there since the figs were ripe, and now 'tis the month of Tisri, and the men are ploughing and sowing, and the feast of the Tabernacles is at hand."

Achsah hesitated a moment, it was hard to refuse the child—besides, why should she?

"I will see thy mother, dearest heart," she said. "I fear Adoniram is too busy preparing for thy feast this afternoon, to go with us; still, thy mother may be willing for us to go unattended."

And Binea, when persuaded hard, gave her consent, thinking more, perhaps, of her household concerns just then, and of the gifts which she must have in readiness for each little guest, than of Achsah's words.

So once again the maiden and the child went forth together, and Salome drew a deep breath of delight when they reached the shelter of the trees. Although the air had grown much cooler, the day was pleasant, and Salome nestled down upon Achsah's outspread cloak, and listened, as before, to stories of the

Achsah

time when the Jewish nation under Solomon was in its glory.

Even while Achsah spoke, her thoughts wandered to that other time when they had come there, and she thought of the Roman, half sadly. Did he remember her still, or had she passed from out his thoughts even as from out his life? Why, oh why, was he not a Hebrew?

Then she checked herself, with an angry flush. What was it to her? She was nothing to the Roman, or he to her!

And all the while that she sat beneath the trees, cruel eyes were watching her, and brutal hands were drawing near to satisfy their vengeance for her haughty coldness.

CHAPTER VII.

The figure crept nearer and nearer to the Jewish maid, keeping cautiously out of the line of her vision, until at last a man sprang with one powerful leap to her side, and lifting the girl in his arms, rushed off amid the trees before Salome had comprehended all that passed. One scream burst from Achsah's lips as her captor bore her off, but ere she could give utterance to another the man with a fierce imprecation had smothered her face in his robe, holding her so closely that she could not give another cry—indeed could scarcely breathe.

At the farther end of the garden, he suddenly stopped, hiding himself in a thick clump of trees, and peering forth eagerly upon the road that skirted the grove there. Far down the road he descried some object that seemed to afford him great satisfaction.

"Ah!" he cried triumphantly, "the God of Abraham hath not deserted me. I have only wished to serve him. I sought the life of Jairus because the man is no more fit to be a ruler in our synagogue. He gives credence to the Nazarene and to all the absurd claims made in his behalf. If Jairus does not openly avow his heresy, it is because he wishes to keep his place in the synagogue. I hate him! I wanted to kill the ruler who believes in that blasphemous Nazarene! It would have been a righteous deed and well carried out, had not those thrice-accursed Romans chanced along just then."

Achsah

At that moment the wretch became conscious that Achsah was struggling violently to escape from his relentless grasp. Half fainting as she was from want of air, and from terror as well, she yet put forth all her feeble strength to regain her freedom. He laughed mockingly at her efforts.

"You may as well be quiet in my arms, sister of Jairus," he cried contemptuously. "Soon thou wilt find these arms thy only refuge; then wilt thou be glad enough to flee to them. A conveyance comes, and it will soon stop here for us. My money can buy friends even under the Roman's eyes. We shall join a caravan that journeys to Damascus. There shall I be safe. I did fear that I must go without my choicest morsel of revenge, but the God of Abraham has granted my prayer, and thou hast walked into the snare. Jairus——"

But that sentence was never finished, for an iron hand gripped his throat and strong arms tore the Jewish maiden from his grasp.

"Art thou hurt, oh, love?" Junius whispered passionately. "His life shall answer for this insult to thee. Speak! let me know that thou art safe."

"I am safe," she murmured faintly, clinging to his arm as he knelt beside her on the grass. "But I beseech thee, do not leave me! See! I implore your aid even as you once prophesied. Do not let me stay alone for even a moment."

"Hush," he said gently, putting back her veil, that she might look around. "Lamech is in the custody of Roman soldiers; they are taking him to the Daysmon for trial even now. Forget that boastful prophecy of mine. Rather than have you suffer thus, I would fain it had never been fulfilled."

Achsah's eyes followed the group of soldiers as they moved slowly away with their struggling prisoner.

Achsa h

Then she turned and glanced full at the Roman, albeit with lips that trembled.

"I seem always to be in your debt."

"You must not think of that," he answered gravely. "The debt is mine when I can render service to you or yours. Yet it is sweet to know that you turn to me in your terror, and so far forget your custom at times, as to say 'thee' to me. Achsah, my life, could you not learn to love and trust me?"

"You are ungenerous," she cried, springing to her feet. "You know that I am here alone with you, as I ought not to be, and that I am most deeply under bonds to you. You should not speak such words at such a time!"

"You are right," he said sadly. "But if I waited for a proper time, 'twould never come. Let my love speak my pardon. Were I a Hebrew, I might be generous in choosing times and ways and means; but I am not a Hebrew. I am a Roman, rich and powerful; yet for thy sake I could wish that I were a beggarly Jew. Thus would I find more favor in thy sight."

"I prithee hush such speech," she exclaimed in sudden alarm, "and tell me if thou knowest aught of Salome?"

"The child is safe at home. I found her but a moment after the villain had snatched you from her side and I sent her to the house of Jairus with one of my trusty servants. I saw she had no clear idea of what had happened. Though she was much terrified, I easily persuaded her that it was a harmless joke played on you by some half-crazy man, and that I would return you safe. Then," said Junius with a smile, "as I had brought with me a birthday gift for her, purposing to leave it at thy house, I gave it to her then, and so she went home happily, with her thoughts distracted for a time from you."

Achsah

"You were most kind; but how did you chance here so opportunely, with all the soldiers?"

"The soldiers, my love, were near at hand searching these woods for Lamech, for we had reason to suppose that he was near this place in hiding. As for me, I came because you came. While Lamech was at large I could not rest for fear some evil might befall you. So have I watched your every movement. I should have overtaken you more speedily, but I dared not leave Salome in such terror lest the child, in her weak state, might die. So I paused to signal my soldiers. That is all."

"And you have watched me all these days?" she asked in slow amaze.

"What better could I do?" he softly questioned. "For what in all this world but thee, do I care?"

Achsah threw out her hands in a sudden wild gesture of despair. "Listen! I will tell you all my heart as truthfully as I may. So much at least is due to you from me. Were you a Hebrew, I would wed you—if Jairus did approve. Hush! keep away! you must not touch me. It is because we are so far asunder that I dare say all this, without a blush or tear."

"By all the gods of Olympus," Junius cried joyously, "those words have made thee mine. I will see Jairus this very day, and whatever he demands I will accede to. O, Achsah, Achsah! how I love thee; let me take thy hand; let——"

"Be silent," she cried imperiously. "My hand you shall not touch. Do you not understand? I can never, never wed thee? The God of Israel is a jealous God. He will have no other gods before him. We are suffering now for the sins of idolatry committed by our fathers. Would you know how they came to sin? They did marry with the daughters of heathen na-

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tions. Thus it was that the curse of idolatry crept in amongst us. Since our return from captivity we have never worshipped any God, save the one great Jehovah. Neither will we to the end of time. That we may keep this vow, and preserve ourselves a peculiar people, no Jewish maid or man may wed any save a Hebrew. A marriage with such as thee is impossible. No priest, or teacher, or elder, would unite us. The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob would forever curse me. Never more could I look upon the faces of Jairus and Binea and Salome. God's wrath would be upon me. Now go, and remember that thenceforward no words of any kind shall be spoken by you to me."

"You cannot mean all you say, Achsah," the Roman cried supplicatingly. "If thy words be true, and I am somewhat dear to thee, then can we wed. Naught else can stand between us. Have not the Romans wed at times with the dark Egyptians, though they know nothing of Jupiter and all the gods of great Olympus, but worship Isis and Isirus and Horus? Since Julius Cæsar conquered all the Germans to the north of Rome, we have oft wedded with the women there, but of Juno, and our gods they know nothing. Still was the marriage blest, and so with thee, dear love——"

"Junius," she cried desperately, "each word you say proves but more clearly that my speech was true, and that a gulf deep as all time rests fixed betwixt us. You may not span it. You do only give me pain and rack my heart. I will not wed with thee, and never willingly will I behold thy face again. Now, I go to my brother's house; 'tis selfish of me thus to linger when they, mayhap, are filled with deep anxiety on my behalf."

"I will go with thee," said the Roman gravely.

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“But think not that all is ended now ’twixt thee and me. If I have touched thy heart, all else may be achieved. Thy words I understand not. Worship in thy synagogue, if so thou list; I care not. Whilst thou goest there I will offer up my prayers to Jupiter; so can we dwell in peace. Our house will hold both gods. This evening shall I see Jairus, love, and tell him all that hath passed between us two, since first I saw thee. This is thy brother’s right. Now come, I shall take thee safely to his arms.”

CHAPTER VII.

Achsah, with bowed head, and firm, closed lips, walked with swift steps by his side. No word more was spoken by either until, as they were about emerging from the Garden, the Roman gave a little exclamation of surprise. Achsah, looking quickly up, saw Jairus with Adoniram hastening toward them.

The ruler caught his sister in his arms. "The God of Abraham be praised that thou art safe! Salome seemed not able to tell much of what had happened here, but I did fear some evil thing, although I gathered from her speech that Junius was here, and he I knew would stand thy friend. What happened, Achsah? Relate it all to me."

So Achsah, trembling still, told all the tale, and the men stood by with darkening brows as they listened to her faltering words.

"In a caravan!" the Roman exclaimed. "Some one then, has played false to the emperor, and had agreed for gold to take the Jew to Damascus! They shall not escape thus. My swiftest soldiers shall overtake them, and bring them to Jerusalem to answer to the highest tribunal for this treachery. I must go to the fort at once upon this matter, but before I go, Jairus, tell me where we may meet this eve. I must speak with thee upon a matter close to my heart."

"Come to my house, Junius," the ruler made reply. "What I have is thine. Were you twenty times a

Achsah

Roman, my friendship should still be yours. Our gratitude will follow thee for ay, because of this day's deeds——"

"No more, I pray," the Roman interrupted. "I shall test your gratitude this night; till then, the gods keep you."

"Knowest thou what he means, Achsah?" Jairus asked keenly as the Roman walked swiftly away.

"Yea, and I would tell thee all. Send Adoniram home that he may reassure Binea, and I will tell thee here, where we may speak unmolested."

"As thou wilt," and with a few words, Adoniram was sent off on his mission, and Jairus stood with folded arms beneath a mighty tree, while Achsah, in low and trembling tones, told all that had passed between the Roman and herself, omitting no word of love that he had spoken.

As she ended Achsah glanced up fearfully into her brother's face. "Art thou angry with me, Jairus?" she questioned anxiously.

"No, my sister," he said slowly. "Thou art not at fault that I can see. I would this had not happened. A marriage betwixt thee and him cannot be. That, however, it will be hard to make him see. He looks upon the God of Abraham as but the God of any nation; the Romans have their gods; the Germans, theirs; the Grecians, theirs; the Persians, theirs; and Junius doth think that the God of our fathers who brought us out of the house of bondage is like unto all other gods. To-night I must make him see the difference, if so be that I can. You must meet him no more, Achsah, and that he must understand full well. One word further: Although thy older brother, I have put but few commands on thee since thou hast been my care, but I do now insist that never shalt thou go forth from the house again without a servant at thy side.

Achsah

This is not my mere wish—it is my command. Dost thou understand me quite?”

“Yea,” she faltered, chilled by his sternness.

“Then see that in this thou dost yield me implicit obedience, as is my rightful due. Strange customs creep in now amongst us Hebrews since we mingle with the nations on all sides of us, but I will remain a Hebrew of the Hebrews. The poorer women go alone upon the streets, so do those who care not for their good name. Thou dost belong to neither class, and for the future I shall take good heed that thy thoughtlessness exposes thee neither to the insults of some vile wretch like Lamech, or to the aid of an alien like the Roman, Junius. Dost thou mean to obey me in the full spirit of my words?”

“Did I ever refuse request of thine?” she faltered. “I will obey thee, I promise it, but do not speak so harshly. Thou hast never used such tone to me before, and I cannot bear it now. I have stood too much to-day. Be kind to me——” and then of a sudden she burst into a storm of sobs, and Jairus felt his sternness melt away like mist.

“There, Achsah,” he said, kissing her, “forget my tone, remember but thy promise. If I seemed harsh, it was because my love for thee made me dread lest danger should again kiss thy garment’s hem. I would shield thee from all harm. Nor would I curtail thy freedom too greatly. I shall tell Binea this day that Adoniram henceforward is thy servant; when thou wishest to go forth hesitate not to call on him. Now look up and smile on me. That is but a poor smile, Achsah, but we will go now to Binea, and thou shalt rest, poor, shaken, trembling child, within thy room.”

So they went forth, and Jairus guided her steps with all his wonted tenderness, but he spoke nothing further, until his own door was reached.

Achsah

Then putting his hand upon her shoulder, he bent down and looked deep into her eyes. "My sister, dost thou wish this Roman were a Hebrew?"

Then as the color swiftly flew into the maiden's cheeks, his hand fell, and he sighed heavily. "Go!" he said mournfully, "I see how it is with thee. The curse of God rests upon us and happiness comes not."

Achsah flew quickly to her room, but even there the tumult of her thought would not be stilled. She flung herself upon the floor, lying there in stunned despair and hopelessness, until Salome, searching through the rooms, found her at length, and begged her to get ready for the birthday feast.

The day passed like a dream, a hideous one. Achsah walked among the blithe-faced maidens scarce knowing what she said, only feeling blindly her own unhappy fate and her impotence to alter it. That night she heard the Roman come, as she had known full well that he would. His voice mingled with that of Jairus, and the two talked on and on for many hours, until Binea fell asleep, and Achsah waited on alone.

At last the foot of Jairus sounded on the stairs and Achsah heard him walking toward her room. He peered in as she sat by the dim lamp, and called her softly.

"Thou must come down this once, my sister," he said. "I have talked long with him, and told him all our God hath done for us, and I have repeated to him much from the Law and the Prophets, and though he does not comprehend my words in full, he sees that we dare not wed with one who worships heathen gods. That much is clear to him at last. He pleaded hard to see thee for a moment in my presence—come."

But Achsah seemed reluctant. "To what good, Jairus? It only can serve to give us both new pain."

Achsah

"Come, nevertheless. He saved my life and thy honor, and dost thou grudge him now so slight return as lies in our power to give?"

At those words Achsah turned and left the room, her brother slowly following. Below, in the day-room, stood the Roman beside the small lamp. His face was pale and haggard, but he smiled faintly as his eyes fell on the Jewish maid.

"Thou art good to me," he said softly, taking her hand all unrebuked. "I could not go forth from this house never to enter it again without beholding thy face once more. Jairus has told me much to-night. I cannot understand your God, but I do see at last that you would rather die than wed a man like me who worships foreign gods."

"Prithee, forgive us for any pain you suffer," Achsah murmured, not daring to meet the eyes which rested full upon her unveiled face.

"The fault in all is mine, my love," Junius returned, sadly. "You told me from the first that my love was a thing impossible, but I would not believe it. To-day have I received an appointment from the emperor as procurator of one of the great German provinces. I return to Rome by the boat that goes a month hence, and I did dream for a few brief hours that I should take thee with me as my bride, to be honored and praised and to be surrounded with all the luxury that my wealth could command; but——"

Suddenly Achsah tore her hand from his, and threw herself into the arms of Jairus. "Oh, bid him go and leave me! I am not made of stone that I can stand this," she cried passionately. The ruler looked upon the Roman sadly. "Yea, thou hadst better go," and Junius without further word went out into the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII.

It seemed to Achsah, in the numb agony which followed that night of suffering, as if life had ended for her. She could look forward to no possible joy; no outlet to a broader, fuller life. Marriage, which alone could give a Jewish maiden some certain degree of freedom, was a thing impossible for her.

Since she might not wed with the Roman (to whom, she freely acknowledged now in her inmost thoughts, her heart had turned from the first), she would not wed with any.

Life, she felt, could hold no deeper bitterness for her. But in that she was mistaken. She had not yet drained her cup of suffering to its dregs.

Jairus watched her closely, though he said but little. On the third day after her farewell to Junius, he called her to him, as he sat alone, pondering the apocryphal treatise on "Wisdom."

"Art thou grieving for the Roman?" he asked abruptly.

"I can but think of him," she answered, flushing somewhat; "but I desire not to behold his face again."

"I judge that thou wilt cherish him within thy thoughts, until he is displaced by some one else. Thou hast nothing to occupy thy mind, so it dwells on the Roman. Achsah," he added sternly, "this must not be. It is an offense against the God of Abraham. I will give thee other thoughts on which to dwell, so canst thou banish the image of Junius from your heart, forever. See that you do it."

Achsa

"Jairus, what dost thou mean?" she cried in vague alarm.

"I mean that thou must act thy part nobly as a Jewish maiden should. That thy thoughts did involuntarily incline to the man is excusable, for in sooth he is honorable and goodly to look upon, yet, for thee to ponder on his memory as it is most evident thou dost, is wicked, and Jehovah will surely punish thee. The Roman is a heathen."

"Jairus, thou art not thyself; you never spoke harshly to me till now of late. Can I control my thoughts? I would that so I might. Then, would I make them full of gladsome memories, instead of things which only give me pain. The God of Abraham doth know my purpose; he sees that it is righteous; had it cost me nothing to send Junius from my side, and to turn deaf ears to his sweet words of love—then would small credit belong to me for the sacrifice I made. I tell thee, Jairus, that for all thy knowledge thou knowest little of a woman's heart. I made more of a sacrifice unto the God of Abraham when I sent the Roman away than ever thou didst offer with all thy tithes and yearly shekels."

"Thou didst well," Jairus rejoined in a somewhat softer tone, "but couldst thou have done less? Ye know full well that hadst thou been inclined to go forth with the Roman I had slain thee at my very feet sooner than have had such pollution come upon my house. Ye could have acted not otherwise but as ye did."

"Didst thou summon me into thy presence but to speak such words as this?" Achsa coldly asked.

"Yea—and to say something further, too. Abinidab, the son of Abihu, hath send his friends to me to negotiate for thy hand, and I think well of his pro-

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posals. He is an honorable man, and fairly prosperous; when thou art wedded to him——”

“I do believe thou art mad, in good sooth, Jairus,” the maiden cried in terror. “Junius I will not wed, for Jehovah doth forbid it; but I tell thee now, my heart is his. His will it remain forever; perhaps when we are dead and Junius in the great beyond hath come to know that there is but one God, and that he alone is worthy of all praise, that our spirits then may come together and rejoice.”

“Hush! not another word from thy blasphemous lips,” Jairus cried angrily, springing to his feet, while his valuable scroll fell all unnoted to the floor; “such language is impious, and thou shalt not give utterance to it in the house of Jairus. I am master here; thou art but a woman and thy obedience is mine.”

“Jairus,” the girl said sadly, “I know thee better than thou knowest thyself; thou art racked just now with doubts about the Nazarene. Thou hearest more about him daily. He hath been in this vicinity again; his words were marvelous, and by his touch he made the lame to walk, and healed the blind, and caused the sick to become well. Thou hast seen it for thyself. Now, thou art perplexed as to thy course. Ye are not ready yet to say he is of God, so ye palter and wait; and while ye wait, ye fret and make yourself half ill with this uncertainty. One other thing I see, Jairus,” she went on steadily, although her lips grew pale at her own daring, “you fear lest Salome die, and you are casting about for something to propitiate Jehovah, so that he will spare her life. Ye think to make my marriage that sacrifice.”

“Is it not reasonable?” Jairus cried wrathfully; “that thou hast read my heart aright I do not deny.

Achsah

But my thought is true. The God of Abraham is surely displeased with us, else Salome would not fade thus before my sight like a drooping flower. Thou hast surely brought the anger of Jehovah upon us; thou canst save Salome by doing a righteous deed and giving thyself in marriage to Abinidab."

"Now hear me, Jairus, for I mean each syllable I utter. Thou art a man—I but a maiden, and, as thy sister, subject unto thee. But I tell thee now that in this matter I never will obey thee. Yea! ye need not look so startled. Even a woman may gain courage in her time of need. Salome's illness had commenced before I ever saw the Roman. The God of Abraham would deem my marriage with Abinidab an adulterous affair, for my love is not his—and never will be. 'Tis not thy true self that speakest thus to me; it is the baser Jairus, whom some evil chance hath roused to unsuspected life."

"And thou wilt not yield thy consent to the proposals of Abinidab?" he demanded, the veins in his forehead swelling out with angry passion.

"I will not," she answered firmly, though trembling in every limb, for the man before her seemed not the tender brother whom she had known throughout her life.

"Leave me, else I may do thee harm," he exclaimed; "I will speak to thee again. Thy compliance matters little, after all. 'Twas but a form to ask thy consent. I can arrange the affair without thee."

Achsah paused in the doorway. "Have I not suffered enough of late, that thou shouldst give me such needless pain? Carry out thy plan, if so thou wilt, but remember this, when the rabbi and bridegroom go to your upper chamber in this house, there to read the marriage contract and perform the ceremony, they had better bring, not rice and wine and crowns and

Achsah

hymneal lamps for a bride, but spices and perfumes for a corpse."

Then, before Achsah could hear his answer, she hurried to her room, and closed her door. That Jairus, her brother, should be so cruel, was unendurable. Almost she thought that it was all a miserable dream of her fevered brain, and that, when next they met, he would be as loving as of old.

But that illusion was soon dispelled. Jairus never noticed or spoke to her, but in some subtle way he made the girl feel the full weight of his displeasure. Those were dreary, endless days, and for a long fortnight no change of any kind crept into them. Achsah spent her time mostly in her room, often for solace looking forth from her latticed window. Thus it was that she learned that the Roman rode slowly by the house many times a day, scanning all the windows as if he fain would see her face. In her astonishment, when she discerned him first, she leaned forward, sending down to him a tender smile. Even at her height, Achsah could see how his face brightened, and instantly he made her a low salute. From that time on, Achsah watched for him. What mattered it? He soon would sail for Rome, and then she nevermore would see his face again. She would take what little comfort might be hers, since now, none but Junius seemed to love her in all the world. So she gladdened the Roman's heart, even in his sadness, by sitting oft times at her lattice and wafting to him some mute greeting. He looked ill, and Achsah rightly concluded that nothing but the hope of seeing her brought him forth from his bed.

CHAPTER IX.

Binea had noticed but little of what passed in her house of late. Salome had grown so much worse that Binea's time was spent almost wholly by the side of her child. Thus two weeks passed drearily. Late one night, Achsah was roused from sleep by the voice of her sister-in-law.

"Achsah, I pray thee rise. Salome is much worse and hath a fever. Jairus has gone for a physician. Come, haste!"

The anguish in the mother's voice told more than words. Achsah sprang up hastily, throwing her long robe around her. She found Salome, tossing restlessly upon her mattress, her worn face flushed with fever, her hands hot and dry.

Binea at her side was trying to soothe her child, even with the tears rolling down her face. In the hall outside were huddled the maidservants, aghast and trembling at the news which had roused them from their slumbers.

It seemed a long, long time before Jairus returned, but at last he came. The physician that he brought looked at Salome gravely and said but little. He gave the child some quieting drink, and toward morning she fell asleep. Binea drew the curtain across the latticed window, and all stole softly from the room, that Salome might rest as long as possible.

Binea crouched in the hall, where she would hear her child's first movement, and Jairus gravely mo-

Achsa h

tioned to Achsah to follow him to the day-room below. Achsah obeyed fearfully. Surely at such a time Jairus would not speak of marriage or kindred subjects to her; yet, she had come to dread any words from him. One glance at his face, however, as he paused by a lower window, dispelled her alarm.

"Art thou afraid of me, Achsah, poor dove?" he said sadly. "I pray thy forgiveness. I had a dream last night, and now I see that I have been striving to make thee the scapegoat for my sins of indecision. I thought thy marriage with a just man like Abinidab would be pleasing to Jehovah, and so I could gain time to settle in my mind about the Nazarene. I feared to acknowledge him as from God, and I did fear more yet to reject his claims. It seemed to me that Jehovah was angry with our house because of my procrastination. So I did seek to give time for myself at thy expense. Sister, now that the hand of God is laid so heavily upon me, wilt thou not forgive?"

"Willingly, Jairus," she cried, throwing her arms around the ruler's neck, as he bent to kiss her. "I knew that thou in truth wert not thyself; thou wert overworked, ill, and distraught with fear for Salome. O, Jairus, Jairus, dost thou think that she will die?"

The ruler groaned. "I fear it, and if she doth, the light of heaven will cease to shine for me. I am going forth now, Achsah, for a short time only. I must see Abinidab and tell him that thou wilt not wed with any."

"Let that wait," his sister cried. "Thou canst tell him that any day; do not leave thy child now."

"I must go," Jairus returned firmly; "it is a duty too long put off, as my dream hath shown me. God will punish me if I go not now."

Achsah said no more, and the ruler, bestowing on

Achsah

her another kiss, left the house, grief-stricken and bowed down.

Salome had not waked when he returned. Binea still sat in the upper hall, and Achsah stole softly down to meet Jairus.

"She is as when you left," the maiden said in reply to his anxious question.

"The God of Abraham be praised that she yet lives," Jairus ejaculated fervently; "it is more than I deserve, but our God doth ever temper justice with mercy. I have seen Abinidab himself, my sister, and all is ended now betwixt us. Have no further fear from him. Achsah, I met the Roman, too."

"Tell me of him," commanded the maiden boldly. "I have seen him pass and he doth look ill."

"He is ill," said Jairus heavily, "and from that wound which he received in my behalf from Lamech. It seemed at first to be healing well, but of late it hath become fevered, and he may lose the arm."

Achsah started back in dismay and horror.

"It is even so, Achsah. He would not tell me all the truth until I forced it from his lips. He hath grieved so deeply over losing thee that the arm became inflamed through sympathy, and now 'tis past all help, so the physician doth declare."

"Bethink you, he will die," she questioned with pale lips.

"He seems not to think of that. These Roman physicians are most skilled, and Junius told me that this one had recently removed a wounded foot that became gangrened, from one of the soldiers at the fort. The soldier is recovering, and the Roman feels that the physician will be equally fortunate with him."

"He doth not care what happens to him, that is all the truth," cried Achsah, despairingly; "why doth God so afflict us? Have we not striven to serve Him?"

Achsah

Yet Salome, the light of this house, lieth upstairs, sick unto death, and Junius will die, too. O, Junius, my love! my love!"

"Hush, sister," Jairus said, tenderly; "perchance this sorrow will roll by after all. Do not unman me quite. I have shed more tears since last night's sun went down than in all my life before. I told Junius of our sorrow, and he would send the Roman physician here. Perchance the man may aid my child somewhat."

"God grant it; hark, Binea moves. Salome must have awakened."

"Let us go up, then, and when thou hearest the maids admit the physician, send up to me at once. I shall not leave my child's bed again till she be better or——"

Only in his thoughts could Jairus complete that sentence. But Achsah understood too well. In the upper hall Binea met them. Salome was again moaning with fever, the ruler passed in to her room.

"Achsah," asked the weary mother, "wilt thou take my place in the household? We cannot all be in Salome's room. So many faces do confuse and tire her. I must be there—I am her mother. Wilt thou see to things for me?"

"With all my heart; I would I could do more to ease thy pain, Binea," Achsah replied, tearfully. But Binea herself was beyond the reach of tears just then, and hurried back to Salome with no further word.

Mechanically the maiden moved about the house, and gave the daily orders to the servants; she was thus occupied when word was brought to her that the physician from the Roman fort waited below.

Achsah hurried down to greet him; he stood within the day-room, tall and noble in his presence.

"I thank you for your courtesy," she gravely said,

Achsah

"in coming thus to a Jewish house. Ah! I hear my brother now. He comes to greet you."

The physician, following Achsah from the room, met Jairus in the hall. The ruler's face told but too painfully of the anguish of his soul, and the sorrow that hung over him.

He wrung the Roman's hand in silence, then led him quickly to Salome's bed. Achsah looked after them wistfully. She loved the child with all her heart, but now she was so powerless to give her aid. With slow step she turned back to the day-room, there to weep out her sorrow. But as the tears sprang forth, she felt strong arms around her, and looking up in terrified amaze, she saw the face of Junius bending over her, and felt his kisses falling on her brow.

Too weak and weary to resist his strength just then, she put her head upon his shoulder and sobbed out all her misery.

"Tell me all that has happened, love, to make thee look so sad since I last saw thee," Junius whispered; "even before Salome was so ill thy face within the window looked pale and worn. What hath chanced?"

And Achsah told him all; as he listened, his eyes kindled, and his breath came quick. "So," he cried, "for my sake thou wouldst not wed this Jew! my love, I do believe thou carest for me! Is it not so, Achsah? Canst thou bear to send me hence ten days from now, never to look upon thy face again?"

"Oh, have pity on me, Junius," she cried. "I love thee, as I never thought to love, with all my heart and soul and strength, but that doth make my life the harder. I cannot, cannot wed thee! This is no time to speak of love when Salome lies so near to death, yet I may never look on thee again. So shalt thou know the full truth from my lips, and thus do I atone for all my coldness to thee."

Achsah

"I thank thee, love," he murmured passionately; "those words shall be my solace through all the dreary years to come. I came here with the physician, hoping to get some glimpse of thee, but I did not dare to hope for such a glimpse of Elysium as this. Thou didst not see me at first, Achsah."

"No," she said, loosing herself from his arms; "I never thought but that he came alone. Junius, each time we meet it makes it but the harder yet to part."

"I would it made it so hard for thee that thou couldst not send me forth alone."

"Do not dream of such a thing; my love is thine; that, I may not control although I tried; my hand I cannot yield thee. Say no more."

And feeling that her resolution was in truth unchangeable, the Roman wrestled with his grief in silence. As they stood there thus, Jairus entered the room, a look of mortal agony upon his face.

"Salome!" cried Achsah, her voice freighted with keenest apprehension. "What says the physician?"

"She cannot recover," Jairus groaned. "O heaven! could ye not spare my one lamb?"

CHAPTER X.

A solemn silence followed the ruler's speech. In the awful shadow of death words seemed commonplace. At length Jairus rose. "Junius, wilt thou wait here till my return? I shall be back this evening if Jehovah prospereth me."

"Where goest thou at such a time?" Achsah cried in startled amaze.

"To seek the Nazarene," Jairus made answer, firmly. "He hath crossed the sea, and is in the country round about. I shall seek until I find him, for now am I assured that he comes from God. Perchance he will listen to my prayer and save my child."

Then, folding his cloak closely around him, Jairus passed from the house.

"What dost thou think, Junius," cried Achsah in despair; "can there be any hope in this strange Man?"

"I know not," the Roman thoughtfully replied. "He hath done wondrous things, of a truth. I passed a crowd once not long since in the plains of Gennesaret; the tones of a man's voice reached me, penetrating and marvelously sweet. I could but stop. The crowd about was made up of the poorest Jews and Gentiles from all the country round. He taught them mysterious things, and they hung upon his words in veriest rapture. Even I, a Roman, have treasured his utterances within my heart, and pondered on them oft. When he finished speaking, he walked among the lame and sick and blind, and healed them all."

Achsah

"And thou dost think he may cure Salome?"

"Yea, I do, love—if he come not too late."

"Too late! then thou dost fear her death will now be soon! Oh, God of Abraham, grant her breath yet for a space, until this Nazarene shall come; for even he with all his mighty power cannot make the dead to live again! I must go to her, Junius. Wait thou here till my return."

When Achsah came back with soft step but a few moments later, her tears were falling so fast that she could not see the face of Junius for them. "Thy physician motioned me not to enter," she said, going to the Roman's side as he sat upon the couch; "he and Binea sit by Salome; the child doth scarcely seem to breathe, and Binea might be almost dead herself, so like a corpse does she look—Junius, what aileth thee?" she cried suddenly.

"Naught of consequence, my love," he returned, with a faint smile. "I would that I could aid the child——"

"Thou canst not," she interrupted; "only Jehovah, methinks, can do that. But something doth ail thee. Is it thy arm, Junius? I will have the truth."

"It pains me somewhat," he answered in so faint a tone that Achsah could barely hear it. "It must come off to-morrow, else 'twill be too late, and I would live yet longer, though life will lose all of its sweetness when I no longer breathe the same air as thee, my star."

"Let me summon the physician now," she pleaded. "Junius, I cannot bear to see thee suffer so; it wrings my heart. Salome seems to sleep, she will not need him for a brief space."

"Nay, Achsah," he said resolutely; "thou must not take him for an instant from the child. He could give me no relief. My trouble lies too deep for that. I

Achsah

sorrow, love, that it doth so unman me now, when I fain would comfort thee."

"Thy presence comforts me more than aught else could; why should I pretend otherwise? I never thought to speak thus freely with thee, and 'tis but the strange occasion that makes the opportunity. Salome in her life and in her death as well, doth seem but to bind us closer each to each."

"Yet thou wouldst break the bond," he murmured sorrowfully.

"Only because I must. My will and heart do lean toward thee—but Jehovah forbids our espousal. Now let me minister to thee."

And Achsah brought him cooling drinks and fruit, and bound up his wound anew, and all the while they talked softly of Salome, and the Roman suffered her ministrations, knowing that such a joy could never more be his throughout all time. As they sat, side by side, the Roman clasping close her hand, he murmured words of comfort and of love. Achsah listened, soothed through all her sorrow, and speaking no word of reproach for his boldness.

What cared she in the very shadow of death for the customs that hemmed her in? She threw all conventionality aside, and Junius, to his astonishment and joy, found that she leaned upon his words, as if she were his wife, and not in truth a maiden upon whose face he soon might look no more.

As they sat thus, the Roman fighting back as best he might the almost ungovernable pain in his arm, a shrill cry of anguish echoed and reëchoed through the house. Such a cry it was that those who heard it never could blot it from their memories, a cry of agony, of loss unutterable, of sorrow beyond the ken of most.

Achsah sprang to her feet. "Come," she gasped,

Achsa

"something terrible hath happened. That is Binea's voice."

She hurried with fleet steps through the crowd of frightened, sobbing servants that had gathered in the hall. Straight to Salome's room she went, Junius following. Upon the threshold she stopped, appalled. Salome was dead. No need to look a second time upon her face to catch the dread imprint of death. On the floor Binea lay, the physician bending over her and trying to bring back life into that face almost as deathlike as her child's.

Then followed hours of confusion which Achsa could never wholly forget.

The wailing and the weeping of the servants broke forth irrepressibly; the house was filled with their lamentations and the noise of the minstrels. Achsa felt as if the fountain of her tears had dried forever; she longed to weep, but could not. She helped the physician to bring the mother back to life, feeling in her heart the while as if Binea would not thank them for their labor. What was life to the mother now that the child of her love was dead?

The Roman, and the Jewish maid, alike obeyed the low commands of the physician, and ere an hour had passed, Binea, carried gently to her own apartment, had wearily come back to consciousness again.

Achsa, leaving the room for a moment upon an errand, met Adoniram in the upper hall.

"Mistress," he questioned between his sobs, "my master seeketh the Nazarene. Shall I go after him?"

"Yea, Adoniram; tell him not to trouble the Man, for the maid is dead, and his house is left unto him desolate."

The sound of wailing penetrated distinctly to Binea's room, and told her all that for a time she had mercifully forgotten. Despite the entreaties of Ach-

Achsa

sah, she struggled to her feet and tottered to the room where lay the clay that a short time since had been the habitation of as dear a spirit as ever breathed.

Beside the bed of Salome, the two women poured forth their grief, while in the hall outside the Romans paced restlessly to and fro, cursing their own impotence and helplessness.

"Junius, this excitement is most bad for you," the physician said, seriously. "It will put you in such a state of mind and body that I shall not dare to meddle with your arm. It is a hazardous experiment at best."

"I care but little," Junius replied. "If Pluto be ready to receive my shade, so be it. I will not rebel. I would, though, thou couldst hush this most infernal noise. Those minstrels sure will drive me mad."

"It is the Hebrew custom, Junius; I can do naught. They keep this up for thirty days, I understand. I pray Jupiter they do not kill the mother, too. We will leave as soon as Jairus doth return. A servant hath gone for him, and we will both be better far from this grief, which we cannot assuage."

"We will go when Jairus doth return," Junius assented; then silence fell between the two, and the younger man shut firm his lips to keep back the groans of pain, even while he listened to the broken words of Achsa, as she strove to speak comfort to Binea.

Suddenly a tumult outside the house smote on their ears, and, going to a window, Junius saw an immense crowd surging in the street. In front of the crowd walked the Nazarene; near him were his chosen disciples and Jairus and Adoniram.

"The Nazarene hath come," exclaimed the physician in surprise, "though I did hear the maiden send word that he should not be troubled, for the child was dead."

Outside, the Nazarene paused, and spoke a few

Archab

words which the listeners above could not hear. The import they could easily surmise, however, for instantly the crowd surged back and became silent. The Nazarene, with a slight gesture of command, passed to the doorway; Jairus and Adoniram walked by his side, and three disciples followed.

CHAPTER XI.

As Jairus opened the door of his house, the Nazarene glanced searchingly upon the outer post where the mezuzah was affixed; then his eyes rested with a kindly glance upon the ruler.

Achsah, hearing the tumult in the street, had come forth from the room in which Salome lay, and Adoniram passed swiftly to her side. "I gave the message, mistress, even as thou saidst, but when Jairus told the Nazarene that the child lay dead, he said only, 'Be not afraid; only believe,' and he came directly hither, even as he had first purposed."

"What good doth he expect to do in this house of mourning?" the Roman physician asked mockingly, for he and Junius had drawn near to hear the words of Adoniram.

"Hush!" Achsah cried. "He speaketh to the mourners below."

From the lower room the voice of the Nazarene rose majestically to their ears, "Weep not; why make ye this ado? the maiden is not dead, but sleepeth."

They laughed bitterly and mocked his words, for well they knew that Salome was truly dead. The Nazarene spoke nothing more to them, but said a few low words unto the ruler.

Then Jairus sternly ordered them to cease their lamentations and to go forth instantly from his house. Wondering, they obeyed, though with much secret scorn and with whispers of contempt.

Achsah

When all the house was still, Jairus led the Nazarene to Salome's room. With a slight gesture of his hand, the ruler motioned those who waited in the hall to go below—then passed in with the three disciples.

"What means it all?" the maiden asked with quivering lips as she sank down upon the couch that stood in the day-room.

"Nothing that can benefit you, Jewess," the physician replied: "perchance this Man doth think the maiden is not really dead, but alas! there can be no question that she is truly dead."

"I know it," Achsah murmured, hopelessly; but a moment later she started to her feet in nameless terror, for she caught the sound of Binea's voice, breaking forth in wild exclamations, half sobs, half mad laughter.

"What hath chanced? I cannot, cannot wait here"; she darted to the stairs, but at their foot she paused, not daring to ascend. A sense of something mysterious and awful held her back. She turned to Junius who silently had followed, and clutched his wounded arm, forgetful for the moment of all but Salome. "What doth that Man in this house? I shall be wholly crazed if he goes not forth soon."

Junius tried to reply, but could not for the anguish he was fighting back. The physician roughly loosened Achsah's hands. "You are killing him with your grasp," he said curtly.

"Oh," she cried, "how thoughtless and how cruel I am to thee, Junius, even when least I mean to be! If thou canst, pray forgive me, but I shall not forgive myself."

"Think not of it, love," he answered with an effort; "to have thee clasp my arm is bliss enough to heal all pain. Hush! they come."

Even as he uttered the words the Nazarene walked

Achsa h

slowly down the stairs. His eyes looked far ahead, as if they beheld the Invisible. Achsah caught her breath in awe, and the Romans looked motionless upon that face, so majestic, yet so human; so Godlike, yet so mortal; so tender, so compassionate, and yet so strong; so sweet, so peaceful, yet with such a look of grand solemnity.

Jairus and the three disciples followed, looking like men just wakened from a trance. As they reached the lower hall, Jairus passed swiftly to the Nazarene's side, and kneeling upon the marble floor, pressed his lips reverently to the hem of the Master's garment.

"My Lord and my God!" burst from him, as if by some hidden power.

The Nazarene said naught, but looked upon him with those eyes which seemed to peer into the inmost recesses of the soul, and to read there, as in plainest script, the hidden secrets of the heart.

Slowly he turned his gaze until it rested upon the three who watched the scene in mute bewilderment. Then, without a word, he stretched forth his hand with kingly gesture, and let it rest lightly for a second's space upon the Roman's arm. Still silent, he folded his cloak more closely round him, and so passed into the outer air. Jairus followed him with humble, adoring look.

The Roman physician broke the silence first with a contemptuous laugh. "So that is the charlatan concerning whom we hear so much ado! He is naught but an impostor working upon the fancies of weak men and weaker women."

At those words, the ruler's face blazed into angry life and passion, but ere he could speak Junius held forth his arm, tearing the bandages from it with rapid fingers.

"Who this Man may be, I know not but one thing

Achsa h

is clear to us all. Whereas, I stood here but a moment since, weak as a child, and sick e'en unto death—now I am whole and well as you. Behold!" and thereupon he stretched forth his arm that had been wounded, and now, as they all gazed upon it in speechless astonishment, they found no scar at all upon the flesh, no slightest sign of cancerous growth. It was firm and whole and perfect.

The physician grasped it in his hands, still unbelieving, pinching the flesh and striving with all his might to learn how the miracle had been accomplished.

"It is the work of some necromancer," he cried angrily.

The Roman smiled. "I was sick; now I am healed; I was faint; now I am strong. How the Nazarene achieved this wonder, I know not. But I do know that when his fingers touched me for an instant, my feebleness fell from me like a garment. I speak what I do know, and testify what I have felt."

The ruler spoke then, with a strange, rapt look upon his face. "This is the Lord's doings. It is marvelous in our eyes. Come ye, and see the wonder he hath wrought."

They followed him in silence up the stairs unto Salome's room. There, Achsa h felt the blood flee from her heart; she would have fallen to the floor had not Junius caught and held her in a close embrace; for there, before their eyes, stood the dead. Salome lived; she looked on them and smiled.

* * * * *

Capernaum was in a tumult of curious wonder. The house of Jairus was besieged by those who wished to look with their own eyes upon the child. Naught else was talked of in the homes or at the public marts. The priests in a frenzied rage strove to stop the cur-

Achsah

rent of excited talk; they might as well have tried to stem the ocean with a block of wood.

Upon the second day the Roman went again to the ruler's house. His mouth was firmly set and wore a look of fixed resolve.

Jairus welcomed him eagerly, and contrary to the Jewish custom led him to the room where the women of the family were gathered.

"I have brought thee here, Junius," the ruler said, "because Salome hath often asked for thee within these last two days, and she doth grieve that thou so soon must leave us."

"I thank thee, Jairus, for showing me such kindness," the Roman said, and even as he spoke his eyes met Achsah's, and held them in a gaze which told her all his heart.

"The people still talk of nothing but the wonders that happened here two days ago," said Jairus, gravely. "The priests are much enraged at me and declare that this is all a trick made up to give the Nazarene more power among the credulous."

"We, here, know that they utter lies," the Roman cried. "Can I forget my sufferings, or how they suddenly ceased at his mere touch? Salome! speak, and tell me what he said to thee. What happened while ye lay there dead?"

"My memory seems sealed," Salome answered. "There are things I fain would tell, but they escape me. Perchance I saw visions while dead that it is not lawful now for me to utter. What I first remember is, that some One took my hand in his, and softly said, 'Talitha cumi,' and straightway I arose, and felt strong as never in my life before. And that is all I know."

"Verily this Man is Lord of life and death!" cried Junius.

Achsah

"Thou hast spoken rightly," declared the ruler, pacing the room thoughtfully. "Whatever other men may do, I and my house, my man servants and my maid servants, and all within my gates shall thenceforth serve him."

"The priests will never forgive thee, Jairus," the Roman exclaimed.

"I know that well. They are hypocrites. They hate goodness because it doth make manifest their own unrighteousness. I know well that the priests will never rest until by some means they do put me forth from the synagogue. Let them! I shall serve the Nazarene. The God of Abraham is with him."

The Roman rose slowly to his feet; "I have waited for two whole days to come to thee, until my mind was clear as to mine own course in this matter. The gods of Olympus are fallen. A greater than they hath come into the earth. Mine eyes hath seen the wonders he hath wrought." He paused; "It was no light thing for me to break away from all the traditions of my country and my race, and I have neither slept nor eaten since I saw ye last for pondering on this, but now I come to say I believe in the Nazarene. I have heard his teachings. By them shall I strive to live henceforth."

"And thou, a Roman, canst say this, while mine own countrymen do spurn him!" Jairus exclaimed. "It passeth mortal wisdom. But thy words do make my soul rejoice exceedingly; we are brothers now in very truth."

A sudden light leaped into the Roman's eyes at that speech. "Jairus," he cried impetuously, "I swear that I had no such thought in my heart when I came here. Thou thyself hath given birth to it, but may not thy words become a verity? Give Achsah unto me to be my wife, so shall we be brothers. Hush, do not an-

Achsah

swer all too quickly; think upon what I say. I love thy sister with my full strength. I do believe her heart is mine. Thou canst trust my honor; we both do worship the Nazarene. I am not a Jew, 'tis true; for her sake, I could find it in my heart to wish I were. I am a Roman, rich and powerful; give thy sister unto me; I will shield her, love her, and protect her with my life. Achsah!" but Achsah had hidden her face upon Binea's shoulder, and though she spoke no word of assent, she yet offered no protest to the Roman's petition. So, he was full content.

But Jairus looked upon him with a troubled brow and for a long time he made no reply. Then he sighed heavily.

"Junius, I do honor thee, but thou askest hard things of me. To give my sister to a Hebrew who but a few days hence would take her from our midst into a distant land, would be no easy thing to do. And yet, thou—a Roman—dost dare to ask it boldly. How is it that the memory of the Nazarene obtrudes itself upon my mind and will not let me reject thy suit as I fain would do? My life seems all awry, my purposes all changed. Achsah, rise and let me look on thee. So. Now speak. Thou didst hear what Junius said. Wouldst thou go with him, if I yielded my consent?"

The maiden paused, then turned a lightning glance upon the officer; so full was it of love and trust that if his heart had held one thought disloyal to her, he must have perished then through very shame.

"Yea, brother, I will go with him."

"Then, Junius, I dare not refuse thy prayer. But for thee, Binea would be widowed, and Salome fatherless. But for thee, too, Achsah would have fallen into the hands of Lamech. Never did I think that one from my household would wed with an alien, but

Achsah

the Nazarene hath taught me many things. Take the maid, and the God of Abraham do unto thee as thou dost do to her."

"Jairus, I thank thee," said the Roman solemnly. "My life shall prove that I am not all unworthy of thy confidence and trust." Stretching out his hands he received the maiden from the ruler's arms, and in the sight of all, he bent down reverently and left his kiss upon her lips.

"'Tis almost too sweet to be believed," he murmured, passionately. "Is it true that thou, the proud Jewish maiden, who scarce would look on me, will leave home and kindred for a Roman's sake? I dare not tarry, love, since the Emperor commands my return. Next week I must of a surety set sail. Can it be," he questioned, anxiously, "that thou wilt go with me?"

Achsah, with a tender smile, looked first upon her kindred—then on him; then she made answer in the words of the old story known to every Jew: "Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and since we both do worship now the Nazarene, 'thy God, my God.'"

THE END.

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